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Harbor

by

Jason Michael MacLeod

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English

Program of Study Committee:
Sheryl St. Germain, Major Professor
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Iowa State University

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2004

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Jason Michael MacLeod

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

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Introduction

My earliest memory is of a slope of granite leaning out from a sparse hill of pines, the soil worn back from erosion to reveal the hard salt and pepper of the rock beneath. It is Maine, summer, and I stand looking down at the rock beneath my small sneakered feet. Years later in a college geology class, I will learn of how magma from a twelve mile depth can rise up, cool into a bed of white feldspar, gray glassy quartz, and dark mica, but in this memory I'm not interested in the science of it, the truth behind its presence. I'm simply transfixed by the texture of it, this the largest rock my three-year-old eyes have ever seen.

The voice of a grandparent from the walking path calls me to come on back. There is wind. Then the memory ends. Before this memory I am nothing. This image is the creation myth of my consciousness.

I have often wondered why this memory is my first memory. Why do the things that stay with us, stay with us? It is often said that our earliest memories are not genuine memories at all, but the memories of dreams. One may wonder then about this slippery line between the actual and the fanciful, truth and mythology. I believe poetry is a strong venue for exploring this ripe area. As a form, the poem can straddle this divide, lend insight, meaning. While not precisely recreating an image or memory or feeling, the poems acts as a translation of experience and through this translation insight is gained.

In the following collection, *Harbor*, I explore the memory of growing up in rural Maine. It is not a document of historical fact, but rather an interpretation of dreamlike memory cluttered with images, stories, and family. To provide order, I have arranged the poems into a chronological narrative of sorts, a personal mythology of my first twenty years.

Also within the following pages I acknowledge mythology beyond the personal, inviting—sometimes overtly—the presence of biblical, Greek, fairy tale, and other legendary motifs. Through this inclusion of other mythologies, I implicitly argue for a universality of certain “coming of age” moments present in many of the more narrative poems in this collection. While, of course, most people were not born and raised in Maine, there is a commonality of experience in terms of growing awareness of the world: the first experience of mortality, the first experience of class, the first experience of love. It is my hope that the work contained in this collection move beyond the strictly personal to a larger sphere.

I’ve come to the title, *Harbor*, for several reasons: the first is simply that harbors are a common sight growing up in Maine. It was standard practice during my high school years to take occasional “leaves of absence” during the school day to head to the coast. A number of the poems here are either set on the coast or in the presence of bodies of water. Further, the word “harbor” itself intrigues me as it functions as both a noun and a verb: The noun “harbor” refers to a location of safety or a refuge, while the verb form can refer to not letting go of something. Each meaning, I think, works in the context of this collection. Many of the poems contain moments or images that I have harbored within myself for years that only recently have been set down in writing.

The landscape of my writing is that of the rural north-east where I grew up. In this tradition of “North Eastern” writing there is an understanding of the geography beyond what is seen on postcards or in the pages of a travel brochure. Winter howls with real threat. Trees lurk. Rocks jut upward. The sea-water of the Atlantic serves as much as a mirror for the poet as it does an eastern boundary. Ocean is cold, enormous, inviting, bitter, and the lifeblood of many communities along the shoreline. Much of the tourist propaganda of the

north east, particularly the more rural areas, focuses on the commercial potential of the land. There are landscapes you can pay a fee to go see, whale watching tours, amusement parks. What these brochures lack, and what I tend to focus on in my writing, is the real people who inhabit the the environment. The land of the north east is not just a vacation spot, but a home to childhood friends, family, and memory.

Of these people, there is an ironic isolation. In the north-east you are never more than an hour away from somewhere, yet given a choice between a potluck church supper and going out hunting alone, most will start loading up the shotgun. The characters of north-eastern poems are generally working class, individualistic, self sufficient, frugal, Yankee. It is these characters that I wish to write about and explore.

Formally the poetry in this collection tends toward free verse with irregular stanza structure. This is appropriate for a geography mostly bounded by river, mountain edge, and sand. Roads heave. Brooks overflow their banks. In the tradition of North-Eastern poetry from which I am writing there are few right angles; however, I am drawn toward the form of the sestina with its web-like structure. The format works well with complications, with relationships.

My approach to line breaks comes from Robert Frost by way of a formal instructor of mine, Wesley McNair. It was put forth to me that each line should be a unit of breath expressing a thought. As I began to incorporate this technique into my own writing I was struck by how right it felt. Certainly not all poems fall into this method of line breaking so easily, but I have found it to work for the majority of mine.

In the undertaking of this manuscript, I have been influenced greatly by many 20th (and early 21st) century poets, but Li-Young Lee, Elizabeth Bishop, and Mark Strand stand

out as having provided examples of quality writing of which I aspire to. I remember moments of experiencing the works of each in which I exclaimed, “Oh! I didn’t know you could do that.”

I enjoy Lee’s lyricism, his attention to memory, his seriousness. His poem, “This Room and Everything in It,” has been particularly instructive to me in ways to write about memory, the impermanence or malleability of it. The poem, in which the speaker describes his lover’s room, assigning each thing in it a meaning, begins to fall apart and fragment toward the end as memory is superseded by the immediacy of erotic experience. I draw from this poetic lesson the humility of memory, knowledge of its fragility.

I am also drawn to Elizabeth Bishop’s vivid description, her pacing, even her occasional evasiveness. One of my favorite Bishop poems is “The Fish.” Here she describes catching a fish in north Atlantic waters. I am struck by the specificity of her description, how each detail builds toward the central image. The sound of the language too contributes to the overall sensory experience of the poem. In my own writing I have tried to emulate Bishop’s fine attention to finding the right word, the right sound.

Finally, there is a seductive darkness to Strand’s writing that draws me in like an invitation to have an illicit smoke in a high school bathroom. In his poem, “Keeping Things Whole,” Strand writes, “In a field/I am the absence/of field.” This inversion of self as nothing intrigues me as does the notion of absence in poetry. How does one writes about something that is not there? Reading Strand’s writing has opened me to the darkness of absence, the poetic potential of loss.

I consider each of these poets personal instructors in the craft of writing poetry. Rather than the now common writing workshop, I have found the best classroom to be the

writing of other poets. Edward Hirsch once advised me that when one becomes stuck in the writing of a poem the best course of action is to open a book and start reading. In the course of writing this collection, I have fallen back on this sound advice many times.

Thinking back again to my earliest memory, I am struck by the surprise of it, the young feeling of wonder I felt that there could be something so massive as a bank of granite beneath the earth. In *Harbor*, I hope to sensualize memory through poetry to return to that universal feeling of awe, of first experience.

Portrait of Eve

Jogging by
the broken house on Burnett Ave.,

I see her still
on the cluttered porch,

her rheumy eyes
blind as oracle,

how her creased left hand
cradles a world of apple

as her right slides
the knife lightly under the skin,

spirals down
over the firm white core

from stem to circumference,
then lower, lower

until the coil of peal
falls from itself.

Lilith's Prayer

Let the waters be parted.

Let there be sand under foot, under hove, under tail.

It is evening.

Let wind blow through tendrils of hair.

Let flesh be flesh.

Let the moon bend low to the earth.

It is evening.

Let the sheets be parted.

Let him be under thighs, under hair, under me.

It is evening.

Let bodies fall. Let the earth rise up.

It is evening.

So let there be evening. So let there be blood.

Harvest: August, 1941

Before the sun is fully risen
above the gristled Eden of Casco Bay,
my grandfather slogs the moist flats—

digs and scrapes in the black mud
for its slick musky clams that later
will pay for hot dogs, smokes, and pop.

With a spilt bucket behind him,
his rake's smooth shaft rests against
the naked flesh of his young tanned stomach.

He stares at what the ocean has done.
Five minutes. Longer. His clams
begin to burrow back into the earth,

pull of the tide sliding them slowly under.
And all along the beach, on a grander scale,
this rhythm, this gentle shoving

under the sand. Glass, wire, metal,
planks of wood, all rock back and forth
into the wrinkled ground.

My grandfather watches the Van Horn,
once bound for Halifax, now torn
before the shore. Broken fruit crates

share their contents with gulls as the broken
men within the ship's husk share
their blood's salt with that of the dark water.

My grandfather's arm is not yet inked
with a unit's insignia, his hand is not yet
gnarled from fifty-year old shrapnel

and with the tenderness he will one day embrace
a small child, making him cry out at the scarred grasp,
he plucks a bobbing gift from the ocean at his feet.

He does what any young man
fierce with the sweat of morning would:
he shines the sweet apple. And he bites.

Bedtime

Remember the darkness
of the first night alone.
The distant sound of Father

fumbling off switches.
The finality of Mother
shrouding you in covers.

She pulls back, the door shuts,
and you look to it:
this terrifying nothing

suspended above the plum
of your small face.
The gap between skin

and night draws closer.

The Negative

The four ghostly frames,
tucked inside the fabric
of my mother's jewelry box

became hazed with the smudges
of my young fingers.
It was ritual

to hold the negative against
the window's bright pane, trying
to expose

the thin celluloid secret,
an other father's face.

East Pond, November 1978

Wool-sweatered and snug,
I lie belly against the rough
boards of the boat dock.

Parents distracted by the rituals
of closing, of placing plastic
over cottage windows,

tarp over upturned canoe,
I am free to look for fish—sunfish.
I remember in the summer

their slick orange bodies
brushing against my young legs,
how one would circle to my kneecap

poke its scaled nose against skin,
send me shrieking back to shore,
for a moment, until I was ready

once again to feel the brush
of that bright world against mine.
I notice now how the shaggy grass

leading to the water's edge
is a faint shade of itself, how still, cold,
water is silent as my held breath.

The fish have left for other currents.
In later years, I will dive deep
into the returned warm water,

but for now, it is autumn.
and I am four years old.
I don't yet know that the world comes back.

Kitchen at Night

These are sounds much can be made of after midnight:
your father muttering down the long thin hall of the trailer,
the gun closet clicking open, and then the faint jingle

of the brass bullets he ground and primed himself
being fed one after another into the rifle you've never dared to touch.
Peek down the hall. You'll see him in the moonlight,

his skinny legs rising up to Fruit-of-the Loom briefs, old t-shirt
still stained from the last time he changed the Chevette's oil.
You'll wonder for a moment why he stands, elbow cocked,

rifle butt against shoulder and looks outside to the dark yard
where earlier you played in dirt, drove plastic trucks into muck.
Calculus helps you figure out where things need to be

he once told you to explain what he used to teach at the high school
before taking the insurance job with your uncle, the job he hates.
Later you will learn of the mathematical proofs. The given:

a teacher's salary cannot support a family of four. The deduction:
he would give up what he loves for you. The observation:
his vein on his forearm as he grips the barrel, the recoil of his body

as the shot spins out through the glass of the kitchen window,
fine cracks forming like frost on the pane, then the sound--
the skunk that had shredded your garbage for days getting away.

School Bus in Winter

It was much like a ferry ride
out to Vinalhaven or Mantinicus:
the long yellow cabin
swaying slow around corners,
the bob of thick tires
navigating deeper drifts.
Living at the latitude
of a four o'clock sundown
we were all weary travelers,
all glazed and watching, waiting
until each day it was just the two of us
on the wide green seat,
bundled neighbors
feeling the tide of the road
slide us to the left and to the right,
moving closer
by not quite moving apart.

Small Gods

It was an attic burial
for the red buttoned joystick,

the inseparable switches: reset & select,
the grooved black geometry of the Atari,

all boxed and left amid the
receding flotsam of 1984.

O Mario, our video game muse Mario,
how you freed the pipes from turtles,

showed us the pure power of plumbing
in 8-bit color on a 13 inch screen.

Centipede, Crystal Castles, Joust,
the sturdy angles of their cartridge plastic

seated securely, circuitry against circuitry,
heated electrons mingled into something more.

And *Q-Bert*, what brave motions you made,
armless, hopping diagonally from cube to cube

evading snakes, earning the ding of a new high score.
Moon Patrol, Omega Race, Planet of Zoom.

Air Wolf, Asteroids, Astro War and more.
Like small gods we moved through

the epic of the maze, the electronic field.
Jason, Michael, Michelle and Luke . . .
Theseus, Odysseus, Athena, and Mars . . .

Chelsea Woods in Autumn

Tonight, the television scientist
gestures to nothing,
to the long black spaces splayed out
between stars, galaxies, constellations
of Virgo and Ursa Major.
It's here, he says,
that ninety-nine percent of everything *is*.

One night as a child I walked out
my back door, trudged down
the mossy hill to the low piled stones
separating field from forest,
then crossed over into the pines,
into the damp woods,
where for a time
there was a logging trail to follow,
then a foot path, then
nothing but branches against skin,
mud rising up over my sneakers,
jutting rocks stumbling my steps,
until in darkness something whispered, *stop*.
It was a dark god moving by slowly.
I could feel her slow pad
of paws, could imagine her claws
grinding the earth, hear the crack
of tree limbs breaking
against her great black shoulders,
and then, as the wind changed,
the smell, the dank musk,
blew over me like warm breath.

The Sound of Falling

I know the speed of autumn;
it's an old album moving at 33 rpm.
The music? Something your uncle might have.

The one who, in an old photograph,
had the thick wild hair of a badger--
who wore it curled behind young ears

and stood in line, one London September,
to watch a free Blind Faith concert in the park.
Look closer. You'll see his hand

smooth a new corduroy jacket,
a friend he doesn't know pass a joint.
And all the while, beyond the frame,

atop the stage, Clapton and Winwood
circle in a groove. Strains of guitar
and voice spiral out like sudden sparrows,

a flock one day tiring and landing on the fence
outside the open window of his small apartment.
Your uncle with broken turntable on his lap

thinks of the days before he sees his child again
and of the last few hours before
the line of commuter traffic at dawn.

A slow finger turns the record. He tries
to hear needle against vinyl. He tries
to hear the sound of anything at all.

Fighting Luke

At thirteen,
when they let you live next door,
my father said he could smell
the foster kid in you.

All through that first winter
I waited to get close enough to try,
until on top of the school yard snow pile,
with classmates chanting, *King of the Mountain*,
we traded embraces and blows.

Finally, I caught your scent,
not of hand-me-downs and dirt,
but of the sweet damp wool
of a child playing in February.

What the Rain Brings Up

On the cracked tar
of the school playground

still wet
from last night's

downpour,
Jonah looked for the one

as thick as sausage,
the fattest of them

that waggled
like one of our fingers

always pointed
at his pale glass eye.

There was never
any question

of lifting the worm
to his mouth,

of letting its long
slick segments

dangle
from his lips

as he chewed.
We all crowded near,

trying to laugh away
this sight

of what's left for us
when there is nothing

left to do.

Flood in April

Something about the way
he knocked on my bedroom window
after walking eighteen miles
from the Thomaston home for boys
made me bring to his hiding place
by the brook an old sheet,
stretch of laundry line, thermos of milk.

That night we struggled to loop the thin rope
around the rough bark of fallen spruce,
sling the white fabric up and over,
watch it drift down like a spirit.
Under this best shelter
two fourteen year olds could make,
we scraped pine tassels into piles,
made a small bed. Here, was a stump for a stool,
this dry moss a pillow for his head.

The next night, I brought a jar of peppers,
wheat bread wrapped in foil.
We stacked branches in bundles,
poured out gasoline from a jar,
then threw a match and felt
the flames burn warm as last summer
when he stayed with that year's foster parent next door.

On the last night, Canadian rain
washed down from the north-west,
filled tributaries to bursting,
water rising up along muddy banks.
In my safe bed, I imagined him in the current,
how he would survive to be swept downstream again,
a strong swimmer, strong enough for a while.
I imagined the long slow pull.
I imagined the gravity of moving water in spring.

The Axe Bearer

“‘Do I find you here, you old sinner,’ said he. ‘I have long sought you.’”
--from “Little Red Riding Hood,” The Grimm Brothers.

In my mind,
sometimes I don't save her.
Sometimes I stand still,
outside the windowsill,
muck trod boots heavy
against fallen leaves.
There is always a low wind
from the valley.
There is always the wolf
in the old bed.
Long teeth, the rasp
of sleeping howl,
belly full and low
with the weight of her.
Sometimes I think
I can turn away.
Turn back to the valley
where there are cottages,
voices of friends, bread
rising up.
But even in this telling,
my telling,
I kick open the door,
face flushed,
hungry to rip
with my long blade
the wolf's flesh.
There is blood
and it is done.
She steps whole
from the wolf's belly,
takes my hand,
thanks me, calls me uncle.
I can only back away,
knowing again
the truth of the tale:
to kill the wolf, I am the wolf
and in this house
something always dies.

When We Wrestle We Are Watched

When Haystack Calhoun
came to the Litchfield Fair
they placed him in a sod floored tent
squared him off with hanks of rope—
and then the cheering crowd hurried
to see the old titan in overalls,
the wall of his back, the great oval belly
with enough steel left to challenge to a match
any three men at a time.

It was the triplets from Brewer
that came the closest to make him fall.
How the big man tottered
for a moment, his dull farmer act
fallen away, until the crowd
could see even through the thick beard
the snarl that would make a man
make another man bleed.

It's a snarl that's seen
in even a sterile school gymnasium
where a teenage wrestler, pale from winter,
and gaunt from weeks of stair runs,
circles his opponent—
the screams from the stands
as he takes out the other's legs,
crashes him to the ground, slides arms up,
over shoulder, over neck—the beginnings of a pin.

It's here he drives chin against collar bone,
not because it is a move,
or even allowed, but because it causes pain,
causes the body beneath his to panic into yielding,
causes the howl of this old lesson of being,
of how to hurt.

What Rises Up

Years later, I remember how
your hands brushed the soft fiber
of fall grass from my wool sweater,

so that no one back in the
cement halls of the dorm
would get the wrong idea.

What rises up
in memory is this sudden image
of two leaves, for a moment,
blown together by wind.

Sestina: Doc Holliday's Last Dance

Next to us a pale man exhales smoke up
into the club's hazy stratosphere while he breaks
a french fry between his fingers. He drinks
a dark beer slowly; thin foam falls
from the edge while he gazes down
toward the band. They should start soon now.

At our table I've arranged six, now
empty, Coors into a ghost town of three up
and down streets. Scissoring my fingers down
one slick formica avenue, I'm a gun fighter who breaks
the law. The kind who blindly falls
in with the wrong crowd and fights as much as he drinks.

Maybe even Doc Holliday on a bad day, spilling drinks
and yelling, *You don't want a piece of me 'cause now
I'm packing thumbnail, mister.* My dumb game falls
short of pleasure and so I turn to think of her, hair up,
reclined back in her chair while dull light breaks
off her thin necklace. Her brown eyes are cast down

and as hopelessly distant as someplace far down
I-95. Maybe Baltimore or, hell, even Babylon where drinks,
although plentiful, have far too many names. She breaks
our silence with a, *Hey, wake up*, and pokes me now
so that I see the band has finally finished setting up.
A meandering song begins as the light in the club falls.

We rise together from our cheap metal seats (mine falls
over) and then begin to dance slowly, the beer down
in my gut churning like tumbleweed and rising up.
Into her ear I swear I will use what rhythm the drinks
have left me and what balance I can take from these now
foreign steps. But in a glide, the world breaks

open and I clip our table, toppling glass that breaks.
The ghost town resting too close to the edge falls
to the floor. All the other couples are dancing now.
I see myself half-slink, half-stumble down
to my knees that scrape against the shells of spilt drinks.
The pale man nearby takes out another cigarette and lights up.

I stare at the breaks of glass, tracing a finger over a shard, down an edge that cuts. A drop of blood falls into the shattered drinks and now my hands are too tired to clean it all up.

Lucy's Prayer

after Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

His slope of shoulder,
arc of back,
the Texan's bowie knife
hidden under dark jacket.
On this parlor's couch
knee touches knee,
his suitor's voice low
and broad with whispers.

To graze hand
against panted thigh,
to slide closer hip to hip
would undo this lady.
So let flush of face
drain, let this blood
run down, away,
until my haunting
of his dark places
are mine to choose,
mine to say.

Renfield's Prayer

after Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

O, grant me the millipede, the cockroach,
the wasp, each segment of armor
perfect against another,
perfect like Vlad the Impaler's
scaled mail in 1463,
his lance punctures the body,
the proboscis punctures the skin.
Here in the asylum,
all things bleed into one.
Give me the larva, the pupa,
the cocoon, the coffin,
an insect circling closer and closer.
The stinger, the thorax,
the teeth, the throat.
The sedatives, the ether,
the mantis, the man.
Bite down, strap down,
there are wolves in this garden.
There is venom in this blood.
Work the mandibles,
work the wings,
work while they all walk away
from this lunatic devil
and his vampires and angels
falling through the air.

Dracula's Prayer

after Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

Relegated to blood drives
pigs blood from butchers,

stints on Sesame Street
teaching toddlers to count,

hawking Chocola flavored cereals,
now, even TV series'

have blondes named Buffy
slay me as I sleep.

But know this, Lord,
I am the dragon and not the lamb.

I am Nicolae Ceausescu.
Jeffrey Dhalmer on a bad day.

I am the twinkle
in Martha Stewart's smile.

So, let Wall-Mart
stock plastic Carpathian capes.

Let Julia Roberts play me in
Dracula XVII.

I can wait for the fake blood
to run back to the real.

This is one snake
who can't be tricked

this is one snake
who won't bite his own tale.

The Art of Staying

Close the door to the house
and make sure you are on the inside
when it shuts.

Lie on the floor and with a finger,
trace the word, *here*, into the carpet.
Feel the earthen rumble of the furnace.

Remember all the houses
you have walked out of.
The sum of everything gone.

Don't get up, just wait.
The door will open
and you'll hear footsteps,

a voice:
the sounds of staying
after the leaving has gone.

My Cousin Reads Books on Death

There are the usual stories of “going toward the light,” and “floating above one’s own body,” but also, tucked between the references of deceased family member calling your name and the lull of soft arias sung by seraphim are the stories of the forty-five year old school teacher who had a stroke before class, the nineteen year old convenience store attendant knifed during a robbery, and the young girl who slipped beneath a river’s cold crust before being lifted out by rescue workers twenty minutes later. All clinically dead, all revived, all claimed to have smelled the scent of baking bread. He is not a religious man; he carefully writes off the white light to a burst of chemicals released into an oxygen starved brain, the overhead hovering to the influence of Hollywood movies, but the bread--that he doesn’t know what to do with. It is as though someone tired of all the clichés of death, the dark cloaked figures, the ravens, the gray tombstones and decided to throw this odd, comforting familiarity into the mix.

He feels the deliberate draw, the hunger of cancer that grows.

My Cousin Sleeping

Morphine is an unforgiving drug. It takes you where it will. For Allen, the second booster always takes him to a silent nowhere. It gives him white behind the eyes. It gives him a hush through his torso, his limbs, his neck. It also gives him back years, memories of a ten-year-old body free from malignancy and its harem of narcotics. He doesn't dream; he drifts. The world is a current; he turns in its wake.

My Cousin's Late Trip to the Ocean

No one ever thinks of snow on the ocean. Fat flakes falling on the dark water. If you're not from around here you can't even imagine what a sandy beach looks like with six inches of powder on it. And it would never occur to you what a temporary sight that is, how fleeting, the tide slouching forward twice daily to sweep it all away.

Snowbank in March

Under the ghost of rain
long taken into
the still of winter,
the young bud leans
upward toward a shadow
of heat and light.

It is at this moment
spring surprises us.
The bloom lifts up
against cold morning,
a small gesture of living,
green against a world of white.

Statues

“You will be turned into two statues but you will keep your senses beneath the stone that envelopes you.”
The Grand Fairy to Beauty’s sisters, from “Beauty and the Beast” by Jeanne-Marie Beaumont

From the door of the palace
we watch the proceedings.
Beauty’s long pearl dress
slouches toward the alter,
the Beast’s five O’clock shadow
lurks rougher moment by moment,
and our father gazes down approval over all.
O, sister, your veil is graying,
your steps slow, joints crack like granite.
Soon you will stand beside your groom,
his throne. You’ll shine like a queen,
like a polished stone.

The Junkyard Dead

These dead parade
 through rusted streets of salvage,
 avenues arranged
 from the industry of destruction.
 Night shadow lightens,
 forms the memory of one body,
 and then another:
 each slope of calf, stretch of torso,
 sudden moony face
 rises up from nothing
 into near nothing.

Take Samuel Crocket,
 his hunkered milk truck
 in 1952 gliding
 for a moment graceful
 then top heavy and askew
 over dark ice.
 There is the shatter of bottles,
 the long scrape of steel against pavement,
 the bloom of windshield
 as he passes through
 and beyond.
 Glass falls in chunks
 like dinner plate
 against kitchen wall and
 his last thought is of her,
 his wife--*try to be a better husband,*
make a better life.
 Now, he floats from the rusted
 husk of old Ford, joins the procession,
 moves into step beside the billowy
 apparition of Susan Solomon,
 stockcar racer, who,
 one hot August, spun too far,
 too wide around turn three.
 Before the flames
 gathered up around her
 peeling her back, and back, and back
 there was the thought
 of love. Of the pit manager,
 before each race
 bending low to her driver's window,

his grubby hand on her shoulder,
saying nothing, looking down the track.

It's here the junkyard dead march on,
slow revolutions of ghost among wreckage.
It's here, knowing nothing else,
nor desiring to ever know more,
Sam and Sue fumble thin fingertips
against fingertips, hollow palm
against palm, bring the softer collisions
of the last world into the next.

My Uncle Hiking

He is stung, the bumble bee's back-end now a burr on his old hairless calf. He sees the fleshy stinger just above the brim of wool sock that pokes out of his worn boot. He feels the pines along the hiking path arch above him. It's a moment worth memory, so he does, he remembers—back to the 4th of July 1952, his then teenage body sprinting through brush, the nest lodged in the crux of a low sapling, his shoulder accidentally jarring it free, encephalitic shock, waking up in the hospital, the magic cure of epinephrine. But now, here, at his Sunday evening constitutional's apex, amid oaks and granite erratic boulders left by glaciers, he is a mile into the woods. There will be no nearby potato farmer to see him swoon, carry his gasping body to the safety of sterile white sheets. My uncle knows all this before the bee has flown a yard away, before the now half bodied insect has ceased to beat its thin wings. He looks to the path before him, the rocks lurking upward, roots twisted obscenely. He inhales the scent of pine and earth, begins to walk east, begins to walk home.

Before Death, My Uncle Remembers the Birdwatcher

It was 1970 and she was another man's wife. He was their guide on a camping trip to the south fork where she watched birds like she was seeing God and wore a flopping red hat. My uncle thinks of her now, how when helping her to clear a fallen spruce, her hand lingered for an extra second, her husband dashing ahead into the brush oblivious. In that moment he wanted to look up to her dark eyes, see if she had noticed how gently his rough hands could spark fire from flint and tinder. But before he could turn his face to hers, she caught sight of a Ruby Crowned Kinglet and the second had passed, the moment flowed to the next.

After Death, My Uncle Finds Love

After the moment of his death, my uncle stands up again, tries to brush the non-existent dirt from his non-existent legs. There is no memory of dying; just the insistent pull of himself toward the guide lodge to the east.

Tentatively, he moves forward and the sensation is like rolling, a polished sphere in a groove. The journey back to the lodge takes no time at all; he simply arrives. He moves his non-body through the door, looks with his non-eyes into his boss's office where the younger still living man sits before his computer sipping coffee in midstream. My uncle is suddenly aware now that with no eyes he can see every direction at once, can see through every thing at once, can look down into the smallest part of everything at once. Suddenly he is aware of the stillness of light in room, sees it frozen as both particle and wave, realizes that all of time has stopped in mid-tick.

My uncle flows down the hall to his destination where the lodge secretary Lilly Ashland sits. Cinnamon muffin neatly napkined on her lap, her still gaze is to the window, to the field beyond. Cochran notes her round cheek, the slope of her neck, the white hair dyed red. He feels the echo of her full figured laugh at his woodchuck jokes, her pale eyes whenever he abruptly excused himself from the room, feeling awkward and unsure. For twenty three years my uncle has orbited about her, the aroma of her cinnamon teas, the care with which she attached lost buttons to the fabric of his old shirts, her small smiles.

My uncle wills himself closer, angles what was once himself to her face, finally in death catching up to the moment, this moment. He kisses her with the absence of his lips. He lingers. Then is gone.

The Carver

Whether he's at the bar or your place,
on a stool, or sunken into a couch,

his eyes are as opaque as frozen lakes.
The way he answers your questions

With mild anonymous grins, his sudden
random leavings, like a cat remembering

It's supposed to be in another room,
his suspicious silences, all lead you

To believe that he is taking from you
as would a thief, or a tooth fairy, and he is.

And if you were concerned by this
perhaps you would follow him

on a thin, cold Iowa night as he walks
downtown, and maybe you'd

catch a glimpse of his face as he
catches a glimpse of an idea. And later,

while frustrated that he never once
Stepped foot into a black market,

or a secret door hidden behind a dumpster,
you might start home down Broad Street

and see his figure sitting alone in a booth
at the Longhorn Diner with a pencil and paper.

but it would be too late. Because already,
he is taking you, your curiosity, and his idea

and carving them all into the world.

**Telemachus Considers Luke Skywalker
While Catching Several Minutes of Star Wars
on Late Night TV**

What does *he* have to whine about,
this farmer free from throngs of suitors
who pound stout, piss in corners
like dogs marking scent? I see
no mother drift, saccharine as lily water,
indecisive as a ghost, through *his* halls.

Sure, on Tatooine there are womp rats to snipe,
low slung Jawa's selling droids at poor price . . .
But my ocean for his, I say,
my dull Aegean tide for his wind whipped dunes.

But then he, the *other* he,
fades onto the screen
black polymers shell like chitin,
hollow breath, indrawn, absent,
and I know, before even the farm boy knows,
this dark star around which he orbits.

Chance of Ice

As he leaves his house,
 the neighbor boy Jacob
 tries to remember names:
 the pasta he had for lunch was *melon*.
 His boots were *etkash*.
Nana was mother. And he,
 three years ago and Chechnya,
 was *Dato Dadayev*.

Put your hat on, his current mother
 says from the kitchen as he scoots down
 the driveway iced with freezing rain,
 sliding one foot first then the other.

She is old and owns an automobile
 nicer than the stove shop owner had in Grozny.

He stops, sees a penny
 embedded into the ice of the driveway.
 Coins were . . . *akhcha*, he remembers.

In the distance he hears
 a sudden thick noise like
 a rocket hitting a building.

He turns back to look
 into the kitchen window;
 no one is there.

Jacob shuffles along the road's edge,
 moving closer to the sound of the great noise.
 He sees first the steam rising,
 then the angled metal and fractured glass.

It is a small truck, blue.
 There is no fire like when
 Russian helicopters go down.

Jacob peers into the cab.
 A young man is breathing short,
 fast breaths.
 The steering wheel is pressed deep
 into his middle.

Jacob watches how the man's
eyes are closed and how his lips
keep moving without sound.

Then both the man's chest
and lips are still.

Jacob kicks through the crisp layer
of ice coating the snow bank
and with his hand digs into
the soft white powder beneath.

He remembers his uncle Mavsur
washing his father's body,
pressing the stomach gently
and mopping away the fluid
that came out from the bullet holes.

With his mitten full of snow,
Jonah brushes the man's forehead,
his cheek, cleaning away the sweat of his dying.

Jacob is eight years old.
The freezing drizzle has started
to coat his hat, his jacket,
and his mittens so he begins
to shuffle back toward the house
in which he now lives.

Shiila aara, Jacob thinks:
it is cold outside.

The Brush Burners

If, after stumbling across a book of myth,
complete with cartoon Prometheus
stealing a fistful of sun from the sky
to lay at the feet of the grubby
humans milling about aimlessly
alone in the dark
so that they might know
what it is to huddle as one around a warm hearth,
you switch on the TV
to the cold glow of evening news
you might begin to wonder
in whose hands this old fire now rests.

Walk outside. Follow the smell
of wet March brush burning
to a field shared by two neighbors
ankle deep in sticks from the last great storm.
See how they haul one long branch after another
together to the top of their flaming pile;
one will say, *it's getting to be a beauty*,
the other, *she's roaring now*,
each ready to keep the fire going
until the last twig burns into light.

The Well

for my great-grandfather, the water witch

At the scrawny-treed edge
 of the farmer's field
 I slide blade into branch,
 snap thin limb from sapling,
 consider its shape, how
 the one long stem and two prongs
 fork out like wishbone
 or snake tongue.
 Up along the property fence,
 the townsfolk gaze anxiously.
 It is 1931 and they know this land is dying.
 They know that the two bits
 and meal of roasted potatoes
 they have paid me
 may be as wasted as seed over dust.

Still, I walk the parched meadow,
 mouth forgotten prayers to the soil,
 try to feel the brittle wood of the dowsing rod
 thirst downward, down to the wide earth.
 From the fence someone yells, *devil*,
 crosses himself. Others shush him and wait.
 They wait for my call of, *Here*,
dig here. They wait for water
 to flow from rock. They wait
 for memories of old earth to spring up,
 shudder up from buckled boots
 to the slouch of gaunt shoulder.
 The sun burns.
 A child tugs at his mother's sleeve.
 In the dry wind, we wait.

**What is Blue
and What Remains**

1.

I watch as the thick-armed trucker
at the diner's counter hollers for a drink.
The waiter arrives and for a moment,
amid the curves of the offered moist glass,
their fingers touch flesh to flesh.
And this is awful--
an offense remedied only by the sudden
silence of weather talk, of who's
playing Detroit on Monday night.
The water rests between them
and I imagine its small tide rise
and fall, bending their reflections
like carnival mirror.

2.

When I was a child
my father drove us to the coast,
tried to explain how the color of ocean
is really nothing but the sky.
Finally, he knelt and slipped
cupped hands into the cold surf.
It was not a piece of blue
he brought to my eyes,
but a small clear world
covering the cradle of his palms.
I touched my father's neck then,
stroked the slope of muscle,
fingered a missed whisker.
Already he struggled to keep
the water from falling,
from running back to itself.

Lupins: Digby, Nova Scotia

Along route 101 south
they smolder violet at dusk,

oceanic sway rising up
from sturdy stalk to wide purple leaflets

to the tapered white tips
that froth on the waves of themselves.

Lupinus polyphyllus, or the garden lupin:
a tidy domestic mouthful.

But here among long fields
these foreign legumes

grow wild into fallow roadside spaces.
There is a wolf's blood in these buds.

Here, the lupins are growing,
the lupins are growling.

Here, let the flowered stem stand
for more than what is pretty;

let it stand for what can howl.

What Brings the Body Back

Harbor tide sways slowly inland,
pauses against the rough red shore,
then begins the long eastward drift
toward Newfoundland,
toward colder waters.

And tomorrow, like yesterday,
this same pull of the moon
in her wide orbits
and this same ocean
chasing from this coast to that.

Body of water, bodies in water,
in the white porcelain of bathtub
back at the beach house.

What pull is this
that leans the body forward
to her body, bows the head and lips
to neck, to thigh, that draws
damp breath in and out.

What dark gravity
finds us here, again and again.

Let us be poured out
like water from stone.

Let our waters
run where they will.